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Reagan's Foreign Policy: Where's the Rest of It?

By David Ignatius and Michael Getler

IN RONALD REAGAN'S 1965 autobiography, "Where's the Rest of Me?" he offered a bit of folk wisdom about foreign policy that bears rereading now, in the Reagan administration's time of troubles.

"Punting from behind one's own goal posts is one of the most dangerous plays in football," Reagan wrote. "We are trying to do the same thing in our international life and, at the same time, pretend that it is a winning touchdown play. It may be. But smart gamblers will give long odds that you will lose."

How right Reagan was in 1965! A president shouldn't play games with the public on foreign policy. He shouldn't say one thing and do another. He shouldn't take a losing play—a desperate punt from behind the goal line—and pretend that it is a touchdown.

The last few months have been cruel ones for Ronald Reagan. Even some of his staunchest supporters, such as columnist George Will, have questioned whether the president has been faithful to his own conservative values. Reagan, the critics argue, has talked tough on terrorism but secretly authorized the transfer of military equipment to Iran. He said he wouldn't make a deal with Moscow to free reporter Nick Daniloff and then made a deal. He was nearly lured into a disastrous arms-control agreement at the Reykjavik summit and then claimed that it was a great success.

Karen Elliott House of The Wall Street Journal expressed a sense of betrayal in a column last week about the arms-for-hostages fiasco. "It's as if the school drug counselor were suddenly discovered pushing crack," she wrote.

But a case can be made that the twists and turns of the last few months, far from being an aberration, reflect the characteristic foreign-policy style of this administration. The soul of Reagan's foreign policy, in this view, is politics rather than ideology. It is a foreign policy of adjustment, a statecraft driven by public-opinion polls as much as by a coherent strategy.

For most of the past six years, this Reagan style seemed to match the public mood. The American public liked the president's rhetoric about standing tall, but not the reality of Marines getting killed in Lebanon. The public favored a defense buildup, but not at the expense of arms-control talks. The public wanted tough talk on terrorism, but it also wanted hostages released. Reagan provided the sometimes contradictory mix that an America half-healed from the Vietnam era seemed to want. He has been an immensely popular and in many ways successful president.

But Reagan's emphasis on domestic public opinion—in combination with his laudable humanitarian instinct for Americans in distress, from Nick Daniloff to the hostages in Lebanon—has had two unfortunate consequences. First, the president's desire for public approval and his sense of personal responsibility have led him to tailor his policies to achieve the particular ad-hoc goal of the moment, whether it's freeing hostages, putting the best face on the collapse of the Reykjavik summit, or toppling the Marcos regime in Manila—even if that means subverting larger goals. Second, a fear that controversial policies will be rejected in an open debate has led the president to conduct much of his foreign and national security policy in secret, within the sheltered domain of the National Security Council and its staff.

These two traits—secrecy and the stress on public relations—have combined to produce the worst aspects of the Reagan approach to foreign policy: its reactive, ill-planned, ad-hoc quality. The administration, fearing a public backlash, has tended to plan its most important policies in secret, without adequate interagency discussion or expert advice.

The Reagan NSC staff, in addition, has been short on high-powered regional or academic specialists. Instead, it has had a heavy dose of military men in key jobs, such as Vice Adm. John Poindexter, Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North and former Marine Lt. Col. Robert C. McFarlane. While McFarlane and North get high marks as operators, the Reagan NSC staff frequently has been criticized for its lack of civilian policy planners and strategists.

This process has yielded some half-baked covert operations that too often have backfired at home and abroad. The secret mining of Nicaraguan harbors in 1984, for example, inevitably leaked to the press and nearly scuttled the administration's Central America policy. Similarly, the secret diplomacy with Iran that began last year, planned in secret without the advice of some of the nation's best experts on Iran, was a high-risk policy with only a modest chance of success.

The problem isn't that Reagan is too tough, that he conducts secret diplomacy through the NSC staff, or that he uses the tools of covert action. The problem is that these tools are used sloppily, in ways that do more harm than good—at least in the instances that have surfaced. (Reagan has had better luck with explicitly military operations. When he has acted boldly in using force—in Grenada, in the bombing of Libya and the interception of an Egypt Air jet over the Mediterranean with the Achille Lauro hijackers aboard—he has won considerable backing despite the controversy surrounding each decision.)

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Some examples illustrate how the Reagan administration's ad-hoc approach—policies planned in secret but driven by political considerations—has caused unintended problems:

■ *The Vanishing MXs.* In 1981, President Reagan and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger decided to overturn a Carter administration plan—that had been approved by Congress—to deploy 200 of the new MX land-based missiles in Utah and Nevada, shuttling the missiles among thousands of shelters as protection against a Soviet attack.

The Reagan MX decision was closely held and driven in part by politics. The rejection of Carter's plan was not surprising, since the new administration had sought to portray the former president as weak on defense and wished to disassociate itself from his project. The final decision on Reagan's substitute plan—which called for only 100 missiles and for initial deployment in fixed, exisiting silos in states other than Utah and Nevada—was made by a handful of top civilian advisers and left many of the top Air Force brass stunned and in opposition. The basing plan was so controversial that Congress eventually cut the program to 50 missiles—only 25 percent of what Carter had planned.

The paradoxical result: A president who is widely perceived as having improved the nation's strategic defenses has actually presided over a sharp cutback in what would have been America's most powerful missile force. By doing away with the Carter plan, Reagan was also able to satisfy the political requests of his conservative friends in the Senate, Paul Laxalt from Nevada and Orrin Hatch and Jake Garn from Utah.

■ *The Nicaragua Mining.* After struggling to win congressional support for its secret war in Central America, the Reagan administration shot itself in the foot in 1984 by secretly mining ports in Nicaragua.

The president's national-security and intelligence advisers adopted this strategy partly for political reasons. They were afraid that congressional support for the secret war was eroding and wanted a quick hit that would frighten the Sandinistas. But the secret mining scheme backfired badly. It caused an international outrage and ultimately led Congress to cut off funding for the not-so-secret war against Nicaragua. It wasn't until this year that Congress recovered from the shock and restored funding.

Whatever gains the administration may have sought in either military terms or in intimidating the Sandinista leadership, they now appear trivial in comparison to the damage done to centuries-old American traditions of free navigation and international law. American allies informally protested the action, France suggested it would be willing to help Nicaragua clear the mines, and the United States ultimately had to turn its back on a World Court proceeding just five years after a previous American government had used that court to condemn Iran's seizure of the U.S. embassy and its staff.

■ *The Marines in Lebanon.* The administration's decision to send marines to Beirut in September 1982, after the Sabra and Shatila massacre, was well-intentioned but hastily planned. Administration officials explained the Marines' role as a "presence mission," a vague phrase that confused both friends and enemies.

Having dropped the Marines into a war zone, the Reagan NSC staff escalated the conflict without clearly understanding the consequences. By ordering the U.S. Navy to fire on Druse and Shiite Moslem militias, the administration appeared to take the side of Lebanon's Christian minority. From that point, American policy seemed to lurch from disaster to disaster, without a clear strategy. One month Navy jets were bombing Syrian targets in Lebanon, the next month U.S diplomats were trying to cut a deal with Syrian president Hafez Assad. Observing this spectacle, Syria's foreign minister remarked that the Americans seemed to be "short of breath."

In the end, politics and public-relations won out. President Reagan, just a week after he said in an interview that an American withdrawal from Lebanon would have "a pretty disastrous result," began withdrawing the Marines from Beirut.

■ *The Hasenfus Caper.* The dangers of the Reagan style of ad-hoc foreign policy, run out of the White House (and out of sight of Congress), became evident again last month with the downing of a C-123 cargo plane, loaded with arms and ammunition, inside Nicaragua. It led to the death of three crewmen and the capture of American Eugene Hasenfus, whose job was to "kick" the arms out of the plane to the U.S.-backed counter-revolutionaries on the ground.

To get around Congressional restrictions against providing additional arms to the contras, the administration had given the green light to the formation of a private American air force, with ex-CIA pilots and crews in privately owned American airplanes. They did not just drop the arms at the border but actually flew over the territory of Nicaragua and dropped their cargo of weapons on a country with which we aren't at war, with which we haven't broken diplomatic relations.

The Nicaragua supply operation appears to be unprecedented. From what is known publicly, a less provocative system is used in Afghanistan, for example, where arms are smuggled across the Pakistan border by Afghan resistance fighters. So whatever one thinks about arming the contras, the method of supplying them through a private American air force is unusual and potentially dangerous. When challenged about this unusual policy, the administration has said it is not its business to answer who ran the program and where it got its money.

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■ *The Iran Initiative.* The extraordinary and still-unfolding story of American-approved arms shipments to Iran has many of the same elements of the now-unveiled contra supply operation, in the sense that it also involves members of the NSC staff and was operated out of sight of Congress.

The problem with the Iran operation isn't the secrecy, which is understandable, but the apparent ineptitude—not by those who followed orders but by those who gave them. President Reagan defended the contacts with Iranian leaders as a "secret diplomatic initiative" aimed at improving American relations with Iran. But it now appears that the real initiative for the arms transfer wasn't American—much less Iranian—but Israeli.

The Israelis for years have pursued a strategy of supplying arms to the Iranian military, to help bolster "moderate" Iranians and to aid their war against Iraq. This strategy may make sense for Israel, but not necessarily for the United States. Yet it was embraced by Reagan and McFarlane last year when proposed by a senior Israeli official. Lacking a strategy of our own toward Iran, we bought into the Israeli approach.

A leading Israeli journalist explains the appeal of this strategy for Israel. "For us, the Israelis, we gain two things. One, we supply arms to our contacts in Iran. This is an historic Israeli idea, that our interests are in Iran. Two, we show the Americans that we are Rambo. We can do the deal."

The Iran operation, however well-intentioned in terms of improved relations with post-Khomeini Iran, has backfired badly. It has undercut President Reagan's often-stated policy that his administration would not deal with nations supporting terrorism and his announced policy of an even-handed neutrality in the six-year-old Iran-Iraq war. It has stunned more moderate Middle Eastern nations such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that fear the Islamic fundamentalist tide of an Iranian victory, and it has embarrassed countless American officials and diplomats around the world who have been pressing other countries and allies to stop sendng arms to Iran.

The administration's loss of credibility over the Iranian connection comes on the heels of the disclosure of an NSC-produced memorandum calling for the use of "disinformation" in the campaign against Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and the subsequent publication—and White House confirmation—of inaccurate information in the American press.

The Iran episode also comes in the aftermath of a summit meeting in Iceland that left such confusion that some congressional experts, such as Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, still aren't clear what was said and agreed to by President Reagan.

The imprecision over who said what at Reykjavik has shaken a number of American allies, who were not consulted before the summit and watched with amazement as the Americans appeared to be agreeing with the Soviets to a degree of disarmament that might leave Europe at the mercy of overwhelming Soviet conventional force superiority. In the end, the Europeans and many American strategists found reason to love President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, even if they had not loved it before. The reason was that Reagan's refusal to yield on SDI caused the summit to break up—saving Reagan from making a potentially disastrous agreement.

The "spin control" exercise that the White House felt compelled to launch after Reykjavik was one more effort to convince the public that what they had seen for themselves on television (and judged to be a failure) was really another administration success.

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